

A CENTURY AGO

BY TOM EMERY
Special to Siuslaw News

A Christmas truce

The First World War shocked the world with its brutality and casualties. But for a brief time at Christmas 1914, enemies became warm friends.

Over a century ago this month, men of opposing armies called a truce during the first Christmas of a war that has become the stuff of legend. While many of the stories of the cease-fire have been embellished with time, the truce stands in contrast to the horrific warfare that ravaged Europe at that time.

"In some cases, the men posed for photographs wearing each other's hats," said Doran Cart, senior curator of the National World War I Museum in Kansas City. "They exchanged cigars and cigarettes, and drank German schnapps and British rum to celebrate the occasion."

Accounts of the truce vary widely, and it is apparent that the truce was celebrated with different intensity, and with different length, at various spots along the lines. Much of the truce occurred between Ypres,

Belgium, and Neuve-Chappelle, France, and originated when a truce was called to bury the dead between the lines in "no-man's land."

"That's how it started," said Cart. "It's certainly not unusual for both sides to request a cease-fire to take care of the dead. It kind of grew from there."

Some report that German soldiers cheerily called "come over here" to their British counterparts, while others recall Germans placing small Christmas trees on top of their entrenchments on a frosty Christmas Eve. One British soldier compared the lit trees to "the footlights of a theater."

Multiple accounts note that German troops began singing carols, including Stille Nacht, commonly known as "Silent Night." While some Allied troops suspected a trap, many others applauded the music and responded with songs of their own. One awestruck British fighter wrote that "I shall never forget it. It was one of the highlights of my life."

As more trees and candles appeared on the parapets, British soldiers cheered mightily, including one who recalled that "I stayed awake the entire night. And it was a wonderful

night."

A young Bavarian officer was one of many who shouted that a Christmas truce should be made, and that both sides should leave their trenches to approach the other.

He recalled that the British eventually agreed, and that "a man came out of their trenches and I on my side did the same ... we shook hands a bit cautiously."

They were joined by others, and the next day was filled with intermittent visits in no-man's land, where men found their enemies to be quite engaging.

"Many of the Germans who participated in this were Saxons and Bavarians, and a lot of them had lived or worked in England before the war," remarked Cart. "There are examples of soldiers asking about others they knew in both countries."

Amid good-natured ribbing about the other side's war efforts, men stood in small groups, chatting and joking while exchanging goods. Cart says that, unlike popular legend, there were no actual Christmas gifts to each other.

"They didn't give any real presents to each other," he said. "They traded goods they had,

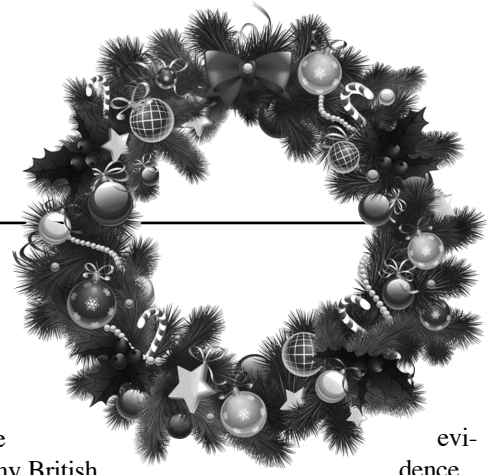
but nothing of any military value. Each side was happy to get what the other had."

Several myths have grown from what many British soldiers called "the wonderful day." An example is that one or more soccer games were played along the lines, a recollection that has been challenged in recent years.

"There may have been some kicking around of a ball, but I just can't see any way that a full-fledged soccer game could have been played in no-man's land," commented Cart. "There would have been so much debris in that area, which had been a furrowed farm field. I don't know that there would have been enough space of suitable ground to actually play a real game."

While the British and Germans are commonly associated with the Christmas truce, some French and Belgian soldiers also took part. However, many scholars believe those armies were in little mood to celebrate with the Germans, who had overrun their countries earlier that year and were accused of various atrocities.

In some areas, the truce did not end on Christmas Day. Pockets of opposing soldiers extended it into Dec. 26, and in isolated cases, for a week or more. Commanding officers on both sides threatened reprisal for the men involved in the agreement, though there is no



evidence of any actual punishments. Half-hearted attempts were made to repeat the truce at Christmas in subsequent years, but nothing like what happened that first year.

The 1914 truce became a sensation in the English press, and countless British soldiers recounted the events of the truce in letters to home and the papers.

The holiday cease-fire has since grown into a global legend, its story captured in books and TV depictions.

"A mythology has arisen from the truce," said Cart. "There's no doubt that a truce actually happened, because many, many men on both sides wrote and spoke of it later. But it's become much larger than it probably was."

Ceremonial recreations of the Christmas truce have been held periodically over the years at the site, including in 1999. In 2014, diplomats of various nations joined to commemorate the centennial of the truce, a remarkable event that one British soldier wrote "made the bitterest of foes friends," if only for a little while.

—Tom Emery is a freelance writer and historical researcher from Carlisle, Ill.

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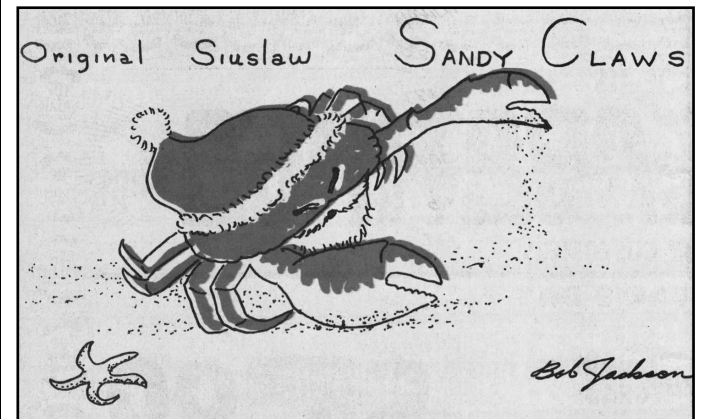
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FLORENCE FLASHBACK

BY BOB JACKSON

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Contrary to adult belief, there really is a Santa Claus ... er, Sandy Claws. He scuttles about the Oregon beaches on Christmas Day bringing good cheer and holiday greetings to well-behaved starfish and hermit crabs. Anyone visiting the beach Christmas morning is sure to catch a glimpse of him — just watch where you step!

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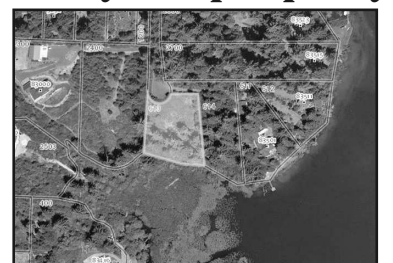
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